

A Historical Overview on the Libyan Novel

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This essay gives a brief account on the history of the Libyan novel. It also illustrates the most important stages that the Libyan novel came across since its beginnings until our present days. However, it is not intended to deal with all what has to do with the Libyan novel and novelists especially in respect of contemporary era. It is rather an attempt to recall historical elements of the Libyan novel with some hints about its contemporary development.

It is believed that the real start of the Libyan novel was late and slow compared to other literary genres such as the short story which is considered to have started long before and has enjoyed quite prominent supremacy over the novel (Assaieh 2015, 63-65; Chorin 2015, 4; Falola, Morgan, and Oyeniya 2012, 51). Fagih¹ (2008, 9-11) has mentioned some of the reasons that led the short story to gain its popularity among Libyan writers and readers. Though these reasons were said to have fostered the climate for the short story to appear as a popular literary genre, they were also involved in the late emergence of the novel. One of those reasons was the lack of book publishing business until the mid-Sixties, which prevented writers from expanding their literary production as to include long narrative works. Consequently, Libyan writers were only able to publish their literary works on journals and

¹Fagih, Ahmed was a Libyan scholar and one of the most famous Libyan writers.

periodicals, which in turn, did not provide enough room for such extended literary productions (ibid.). Another reason was the limited population and nomadic nature of the Libyan society which did not afford as much comprehensive and various patterns of social life as to enhance the setting of long fictional works (ibid.).

The publishing of the novel *Confessions of a Human Being*² /'i'tirāfāt 'insān/ اعترافات by Muhammad Farid Siyalah محمد فريد سيالة in 1961, almost ten years after the Libyan independence, had formed the official beginning of the Libyan novel as a distinct literary genre (Assaieh 2015, 66). The novel addressed criticism to the bad deep-rooted traditions that once existed in the Libyan society (Kalthoum 2011). However, some critics argue that the Libyan novel has actually come into existence even much earlier when Hassan Zafer Bin Mossa حسن ظافر بن موس published his novel *Mabrukah*³ /Mabrūkah/ مبروكة in 1937 in Syria (Assaieh 2015, 66). The novel was set in the Green Mountain Area in eastern Libya and it was about the Libyan resistance movement against the Italian invasion in 1911/1912 (Almalki 2008, 9; Kalthoum 2011). In the 1960s, three other novels were published. They are *Stronger than War*⁴ /'aqwā mina alḥarb / أقوى من الحرب in 1962 and *Alkuf Siege*⁵ /ḥiṣār alkūf/ حصار الكوف in 1964, both were written by Muhammad Ali Muhammad محمد علي محمد, in addition to the novel *A Sunset without a Sunrise*⁶ /ghurūb bilā shurūq/ غروب بلا شروق in 1968, written by Saad Omar Alghafir سعد عمر الغفير. By the mid-seventies, seventeen more novels were published. However, in the second half of the seventies, only two other

² A literal translation of the original title. This novel first appeared in local newspapers since August, 1959 to 1961, before it was officially published by Alferjani Book House/ Tripoli in 1961. Moreover, the author published a second edition of the novel in 2007 one year before he died. In January, 2017, Doha Magazine in Qatar re-printed the novel as a free book along with its January issue for its readers. (Abdurrahman 2017).

³ A literal translation of the original title. Mabrukah is a female proper name in Arabic.

⁴ A literal translation of the original title.

⁵ A literal translation of the original title.

⁶ A literal translation of the original title.

novels were published (Almalki 2008, 9). Some critics even consider the 1970s as the real start of the Libyan novel for its better outcome both in quantity and quality of the novels compared to the previous decade. Among notable novels in the 1970s was *From Mecca to Here*⁷ /min Makkah 'ilā hunā/ من مكة إلى هنا, published in 1970 and it was written by Assadiq Annihoum⁸ الصادق النيهوم (al-Koni 2013, 86). This novel is considered as a changing point in the themes addressed in the Libyan society, as it mixes up the intellectual enlightenment with religious heritage. The novel was simply an attempt at change, aiming to refine misconceptions and long-established traditions practiced in the name of Islam, which by error, became as a main part of Islamic deep-seated beliefs held by the Libyan society (Assaieh 2015, 66). In a commemoration of the novel as it approaches its fiftieth anniversary, Bushnaf⁹ (2014) indicates that:

Annihoum introduced the intellectual enlightenment into religious conception. He paid attention to the social, religious concepts. Thus, his novel *From Mecca to Here* was his important doorway to interpret the Libyan layman's understanding of Islam. Annihoum, in his novel, was trying to spot all the changes and distortions that affected Islam along its long journey from Mecca, where it had purely and simply started, until Here¹⁰, where it has been distorted by local and Mediterranean, inherited myths and legends¹¹. أقحم النيهوم التنوير الفكري في الموضوع الديني، واهتم بالفكر الديني الاجتماعي، وكانت رواية "من مكة إلى هنا" المدخل المهم لـ"النيهوم" في محاولة فهم رؤية الإنسان الليبي البسيط للإسلام. كان يحاول أن

⁷ A literal translation of the original title.

⁸ Assadiq Annihoum was a Libyan writer, critic and thinker.

⁹ Bushnaf, Mansour is a Libyan writer and critic. He was imprisoned for many years by the Gaddafi regime for his play *When the Rats Rule* /ʿindamā taḥkum Aljurdān/ عندما تحكم الجرذان that he wrote in 1973. He is the writer of the novel *Chewing Gum* /al'ilkah/ العلكة which he published in 2008 in Egypt after he was released, and, it was banned in Libya at that time. Recently, the novel was published in English in 2014 (Al-Finnadi 2016).

¹⁰ "Here" refers to the place where the novel was set which was the town of Susa in eastern Libya. Historically, the city was one of the places of cultural interaction in the Mediterranean Sea in ancient times, as its inhabitants were migrants from Crete, the Greek island (Bushnaf 2014).

¹¹ A literal translation of the original quotation in Arabic.

يرصد كل التحولات والتشوهات التي لحقت بالإسلام في رحلته الطويلة من مكة؛ حيث وُلد نقيًا بسيطًا وصافيًا، وحتى "هنا"؛ حيث لونه وغيرته الكثير من الأساطير والخرافات المحلية والمتوسطة الموروثة.

Moreover, the novel *A Glimmer in the Wall of the Night*¹² /wamīḍ fī Jidar Allayl/ وميض في جدار الليل which was published in 1974 and written by Ahmed Muhammad Nasser أحمد محمد نصر, showed an advancement in the writing style, as it was the first Libyan novel with multiple narratives (Almalki 2008, 10).

In the 1980s, the Libyan novel witnessed an increase in published works. The total number of novels produced in this period was 22 novels, which is almost equal to the number of published works during the 1960s and 1970s, (ibid).

To sum up, the development of Libyan novel can be divided into three stages (Adel 2017):

- Establishment stage: during the 1960s. It represents the emergence of the Libyan novel.
- Development stage, which extended from the beginning of the 1970s, until the end of 1980s.
- Flourishing stage; this started from the mid-eighties to the present time. The beginning of this phase was marked by a notable work written by Ibrahim al-Koni إبراهيم الكوني when he published the first Libyan epic novel in 1989, entitled *The Lunar Eclipse Quartet*¹³ /Rubā'iyyat Alkhusūf/ رباعية الخسوف which was also his first novel.

The Libyan novel took almost twenty years to develop. Nevertheless, there are some Libyan writers who received regional and international recognition such as al-Koni,

¹² A literal translation of the original title.

¹³ A literal translation of the original title.

Alfigih, Alghazal, Bin Shetwan, Bushnaf and Matar who publishes his works in English. It is notable that many of them wrote short stories before they started writing novels such as Nasser, Alfigih and al-Koni. Some of these writers witnessed the three development stages of the Libyan novel and they still publish their literary works until this day. Furthermore, they share the experience of living abroad where they expanded their knowledge and experience in literature which participated in the development of the Libyan novel as well as other literary genres.

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